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Perceptions of the Physically Disabled Influenced by Media Portrayals

Jessica Parcell

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Abstract

Perceptions of the Physically Disabled Influenced by Media Portrayals

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Using a quantitative coding method, the current study analyzed cinematic productions between the years 1989 and 2019 ($N = 79$) for presence of supercrip and victim stereotypes among portrayals of the physically disabled. A series of One-way ANOVA – Bonferonni and Bivariate Correlation tests were performed, and results indicated that while negative and supercrip stereotypes of the physically disabled have decreased over this 30-year period, simultaneously, very positive and victim stereotypes have risen. Results showed negative ($F = 3.215, p = .046$) portrayals decreased over time, but that simultaneously victim ($F = 8.044, p = .001$) and very positive ($F = 3.43, p = .037$) portrayals rose. For supercrip the results were not significant. Significance was found in neutral portrayals in the 90s ($M = 0.48$) and both the 00s ($M = 0.77$) and the 10s ($M = 0.88$). This indicated a notable increase in the number of neutral portrayals over time. Findings suggest that while there is some decrease in the number of negative and supercrip portrayals, portrayals seem to have shifted towards the other extreme with an increase in very positive and victim portrayals. Future research could examine what attitudes exist towards the physically disabled and how much media influenced the development of these attitudes. They could also look into how constructs of attitudes and subjective norms contribute to the perceptions of others towards the physically disabled, and how the "interactive process" impacts the development of these attitudes.

Keywords: mass communications, physical disabilities, perceptions, cinema, movies, portrayals

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Introduction

Characters with physical disabilities have been portrayed in television shows, movies, and other video-based media for several decades. From Geri Jewell as Geri Tyler in the 1980s sitcom *The Facts of Life*, to RJ Mitte as Walter “Flynn” White Jr. in AMC’s *Breaking Bad*, there are many productions that have included disabled persons in their cast. Several of these castings, however, depict disabled characters from a particular perspective—frequently—as the victims of their circumstances, or as exceptional people for leading a mediocre life despite their chronic setbacks (Haller, 2014; Lynch & Thomas, 1999). Ultimately, this has had a ripple effect on the normative stereotypes that society projects onto the physically challenged.

George Gerbner’s cultivation theory states that the more an individual is exposed to and consumes media, the more likely they are to accept that projected reality as their actual reality (Gerbner, 1970). Movies provide audience members with a safe environment to explore the unfamiliar. Because of this, if a person hasn’t had any other direct exposure to physically disabled persons, these experiences had with the silver screen serve as their primary source of information (Black & Pretes, 2007). For these reasons, it becomes important to study people with disabilities, because in the absence of direct experience with persons with disabilities, people will establish their opinions about disabled individuals from other sources, such as entertainment media.

However, due to the often sensationalized and money-driven motives of the film industry, early research suggests that the picture of the disabled painted in cinema is detrimental to the treatment of this unique community. Previous research shows that movie portrayals of the

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disabled have birthed attitudes that, to some, are seen as destructive or untrue (Lynch & Thomas, 1999)—notably the “supercrip” and victim concepts (Haller, 2014; Lynch & Thomas, 1999).

Supercrip is the term given with the connotation that a physically disabled person is “portrayed as deviant because of ‘superhuman’ feats (i.e. ocean sailing blind man) or as ‘special’ because they live regular lives ‘in spite of’ disability (i.e. deaf high school student who plays softball)” (Haller, 2014, p.3). In this attitude, the physically challenged person who has successfully integrated themselves inside their community is inspirational or unique, because they’ve exceeded expectations in what is portrayed as their supposedly “limited” ability to contribute to society.

The other destructive attitude that has been cultivated by movie portrayals is the victim concept. The victim concept is the opposite of “supercrip,” such that these portrayals have frequently “...characterized the sad victims, confined to beds or wheelchairs dependent on the goodwill of others for every accomplishments [sic] in their lives, eliciting pity, charity, or both” (Lynch & Thomas, 1999, p.9). In this light, the victim concept is the idea that the disabled individual’s life is burdensome or heavy because of their condition.

Disability is defined as “a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person’s ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions” (Disability, n.d). The purpose of this study is to look at what portrayals of the physically disabled exist in film, to see if supercrip and victim concept are still the most prevalent in film, and to determine if there has been a shift in these kinds of portrayals over time. This was explored using a content analysis of 79 films taken from the top 50 grossing films between the years of 1989 to 2019, and through the lens of Gerbner’s (1970) cultivation theory.

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Literature Review

As modern-day technologies and advancements in medicine have made it easier than ever for the physically disabled to live independently and as contributing members of society, it is important to understand the messages being communicated about these individuals, and the attitudes cultivated about their capacity to add value in their communities. The perceptions influenced by these media portrayals affects the opportunities and experiences that the physically disabled have for self-actualization and fulfillment of purpose, and can have a significant impact on their mental health and personal well-being (Zhang & Haller, 2013).

The majority of messaging up to this point has either focused on the physically disabled individual's atypical development and function expressing an inherent dependency on others to fulfill their needs, or it has over-praised the individuals' ability to function normally with such atypical development and/or function (Haller, 2014; Lynch & Thomas, 1999). These types of messages support the creation of a deviant attitude towards standard expectations of the physically disabled, and a perception of celebrated mediocrity. Understanding these portrayals will help future efforts to neutralize these deviant attitudes and bring about a concept of normalcy in regard to the expectations of the physically challenged.

Zhang and Haller (2013) reported that previous studies have shown the distorted media representations of social minority groups can affect those groups' actual performance and their own perceived identities. Further, Elliot and Byrd (1982) suggested that these portrayals impact all areas of society, not just the minority groups' perceptions of themselves. A previous analysis on American newspapers found that about one-half of all disabled persons were portrayed as dependents (Gardner & Radel, 1978). According to Gerbner's (1970) cultivation theory, these portrayals impact perceptions, which affect how people treat others (Roehrer, 1961). Furthermore, the majority of disabled individuals would reportedly prefer to be portrayed and *seen* as normal

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people (Dahl, 1993). While many of these portrayals hold true today, previous research suggests the media propagates these perceptions in others (Gerbner, 1970).

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation analysis began with George Gerbner's Cultural Indicators Project. The study was originally designed to explore the long-term social effects of growing up and living with television. Beginning in the late 1960s—during a time of political upheaval and distress, and record-high crime rates—Gerbner's research at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication was funded by the newly established National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. Gerbner's study documented the amount and nature of violence prevalent on network television and established a foundation for the long-term examination of the impact of media portrayals on society (Gerbner 1969).

Gerbner acknowledged that the rapid changes in mass communications were not only changing the way information is sent and received, but also prompting change “in the creation of the common symbolic environment that gives public direction and meaning to human activity” (Gerbner, 1970, p.70). Gerbner found a correlation between what people consume as reality from the media and what they believe is their actual social reality, and stated that *cultivation analysis* is the “study of the relationships between institutional process, message systems, and the public assumptions, images, and policies that they cultivate” (Gerbner, 1970, p.71).

Gerbner claimed "that heavy television watching cultivates conceptions of reality in viewers which are consistent with the world presented in television dramas" (Hughes, 1980, p.287). Gerbner developed his research with a three-fold purpose in mind "for investigating the structure, contours, and consequences of pervasive symbol systems" (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999, p.6). His main research questions included: 1) What are the processes, pressures, and constraints

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that influence and underlie the production of mass media content? 2) What are the dominant, aggregate patterns of images, messages, facts, values and lessons expressed in media messages? And 3) What is the relationship between attention to these messages and audiences' conceptions of social reality? (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Gerbner argued violent media exposure would skew the viewer's attitude about societal reality. Hughes (1980) said that these individuals would tend to have inaccurate perceptions of the amount and types of crime in the world around them. He also said that they would tend to inaccurately estimate the number of people involved in law enforcement, have a distrustful attitude towards others, become isolated from others, and to experience an unjustifiable amount of fear.

According to Gerbner, frequent portrayals of television violence are "performed by many characters in a general context of moral approval, violence will be seen as appropriate behavior in some conventional situations" (Hughes, 1980, p.288).

From his theory "that heavy exposure to cultural imagery shapes conceptions of reality" (Hughes, 1980, p.288) Gerbner used cultivation analysis as a research strategy, and as "a way to add a relatively disinterested 'Third Voice' to the ongoing contentious conflicts being waged between political forces and private commercial concerns over cultural policy" (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999, p. 6). Gerbner's argument for the validity of this project was that it could "provide a more 'objective' accounting of media practices, outputs and impacts, and therefore a better basis for judgment and policy" (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999, p.6).

Through cultivation analysis, Gerbner and his team determined the "television answer" or the one "slanted in the direction of the world of television" (Hughes, 1980, p.299). If the analyses showed that television exposure was positively related to the "television answer," Gerbner and his associates concluded there was evidence of cultivation (Hughes, 1980).

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In their examination of Gerbner's Cultural Indicators project, authors Shanahan and Morgan (1999) stated that "cultivation is about the implications of stable, repetitive, pervasive and virtually inescapable patterns of images and ideologies that television (especially dramatic, fictional entertainment) provides" (p. 5). Furthermore, cultivation theory and analysis approaches television as a system of messages "whose elements are not invariant or uniform, but complementary, organic and coherent—and inquires into the functions and consequences of those messages as a system, overall, in total for its audiences" (p.5). The researchers continue saying the use of cultivation analysis and the issues it is associated with has expanded over the years to include not just violence but also other subjects such as sex roles, aging, family, and environmental attitudes (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

In Hughes' reexamination of Gerbner's cultivation analysis and the effects of television watching he quotes Gross and Jeffries-Fox (1978), who argued that "because media messages are commodities manufactured for sale, their perspective reflects institutional organization and control. The goal of greatest audience appeal at least cost demands that these messages follow conventional social morality." (p. 242). Hughes (1980) continued saying that, if Gross and Jeffries-Fox (1978) accurately represented the function of television in American society, then "...one might reasonably predict that those who watch a great deal of television would have attitudes which reflect the interests of the established order, particularly as they have existed in the United States during the time that television has been a common element in American society" (p. 299).

Shanahan and Morgan (1999) acknowledged the controversial approach that cultivation analysis has added to media effects and communication research, stating that "...although the elegant simplicity of the idea has both attracted adherents and antagonized opponents, cultivation

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analysis has also been an extraordinarily controversial approach to media effects and communication research, and not only within the narrow confines of the academic community" (p. 3).

Romer et al. (2003) addressed some conflict with the theory in another article arguing that "When demographic variables are held constant, some have failed to find any effect of overall television viewing at all" (p. 89). Expanding on earlier research (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck (1979) claimed that, when correlations are found, they are often weak. Romer et. al (2003) continued saying other authors "have argued that those defending the theory have failed to account for selective viewing (e.g., Potter & Chang, 1990). Others have argued that the cultivation hypothesis fails to take into account intervening variables (e.g., Rubin, Perse, & Taylor, 1988)" (p. 89).

Romer et. al (2003, p.89) still defended the theory, acknowledging that other media, such as television news, does have its influence in shaping the perceptions of others. He argued these effects reflect events that the news media makes prominent, and this could have a negative impact on peoples' expectations of their societal reality:

...these effects are presumed to reflect events in the world that the news makes salient. It is another step to argue that the structure of the news cultivates stable but unrealistic expectations and fears in the public that are independent of actual crime rates (p. 89).

The author continued saying that even with its potential to cultivate unrealistic expectations, at another level, it has the same capacity to foster stable attitudes of the reality. "One news source that has the potential to cultivate stable expectations in the public is local television news" (Romer et. al, 2003, p.89). He said this is because local news has unique

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conventions that "make its content especially relevant for the public's views of crime" (p. 89). At the same time, the author references other researchers that have argued local news media "relies heavily on sensational coverage of crime and other mayhem with particular emphasis on homicide and violence" (Hamilton, 1998; Klite, Bardwell, & Salzman, 1995, 1997). The authors argue this kind of coverage insinuates to the viewer that victimization is not only likely, but also beyond their control.

Romer et. al (2003) said cultivation theory "focuses on the stable cultural and economic incentives that encourage violent programming on television" (p. 102). He continued saying the support for this theory was found primarily in news reporting, especially at the local level. He re-emphasized that local news' focus on crime "may condition audiences to focus on crime and to ignore other problems that are as important but translate less readily to the television news format" (Romer et. al, 2003, p.103). He finished his argument by stating that not only does this focus have the potential of increasing attitudes of victimization, but it "may also affect perceptions of places where crime is likely to occur and the persons stereotyped as typical perpetrators."

Gerbner's Cultural Indicators research "focused mostly on the implications of growing up and living with television, since it is the country's most widely shared cultural agency and most visible disseminator of cultural symbols" (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999, p.6). Even with its controversial approach to media effects, the two authors agreed "cultivation is arguably among the most important contributions yet made to scientific and public understanding of media effects." The influence that television has on the way others view their reality, it is appropriate that cultivation theory can be applied to movies and film, being that for many it is their primary

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source of information for subjects they do not have a direct experience with (Black and Pretes, 2007).

Cultivation Theory and Film

Gerbner's theory posits that long-term exposure and consumption of media influences a viewer's perception of their social reality (Gerbner, 1970). Previous research has found evidence of this influence in film and television. Referring to their content analysis on the portrayal of older adults in Disney animated films and their influence on childrens' perceptions of the elder, Robinson et. al (2007) said stereotypes arise in youth from their direct experience and also from the media. The authors argue, "television and movies serve as an important socializing function supplying many children with images that can form, change, and reinforce stereotypes" (p. 203). They continued stating that youth exposed to these stereotypical portrayals of older individuals "may develop distorted views of how older individuals really are in society" (p. 203).

Authors Wilson and Blackburn (2014) stated in their research of film portrayals of female municipal officers that, according to cultivation theory, certain depictions of female officers "would cultivate a perceived social reality in which females only become police officers if they are emotionally scarred and intimacy with male colleagues is the norm" (p. 83). Robinson et. al (2007) noted that films are passed down from parent to child, which introduce to each new generation "a set of values, beliefs, and attitudes explicitly and implicitly communicated in these films" (p. 204). It is these explicit or implicit values that ultimately influence a viewer's perceptions of true reality (Gerbner, 1970). Authors Robinson et. al (2007) also noted Giroux (as cited in Dundes, 2001: 353), who argued these cinematic exposures "inspire at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values, and ideals than do more traditional sites of learning such as public schools, religious institutions, and the family" (p. 204).

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Robinson et. al (2007) argued that because of the undeniable influence films have on the perceptions of youth, "exposure to media images and portrayals during a young child's formative years can leave indelible impressions that are carried into adulthood" (p. 205). In their research, the authors confirmed findings from Robinson and Anderson's (2006) study of animated television programs which showed that "older people are most often portrayed in positive roles. Nevertheless, there were still a large number of negative portrayals and negative characteristics associated with older animated characters" (Robinson, 2007, p. 209). Robinson et. al (2007) concluded that despite the positive portrayals of older individuals "children are receiving a large dose of negative portrayals that may help form or reinforce negative attitudes toward older people" (p. 209).

In their research on fictional films' influence on behavioral intention to protect global climate, Bilandzic and Sukalla (2019) stated that engagement, to a certain extent, depends on the individual's view of the issue. Further, they said "there is ample evidence that fictional narratives change real-world beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors" (p. 1070). Kim et. al (2019) said the concept of audience involvement refers to a state of arousal, motivation, or intense interest in a product, activity, or object" (p. 285).

Referring to Beattie, Sale, and McGuire (2011), Bilandzic and Sukalla (2019) noted previous research which found that film clips made respondents "less serene and happy, but more motivated and empowered to act against climate change" (p. 1070). The authors continued arguing that fictional films have the potential to reach audiences that do not usually seek out information on the topic or issue of climate change, regardless of the reason for this lack of contact with the subject (Bilandzic & Sukalla, 2019). Furthermore, the authors concluded their

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findings provided evidence "for the general ability of movies to support behavioral intentions to engage in climate change mitigation behavior" (p. 1080).

In their research of Arab portrayals in television, Melham and Punyanunt-Carter (2019) said studies have shown that their portrayals have an effect on viewers' beliefs about Arabs in general. Their survey results found that most participants did believe what they saw on television as real, but also "believe that these portrayals of Arabs are mainly stereotypical" (p. 269). The authors continued stating that the media plays a major role in constructing people's beliefs and values, and that the specific content of these portrayals of Arabs can positively or negatively affect perceptions of Arabs (Melham & Punyanunt-Carter, 2019). If the imagery offered by the media deconstructs existing stereotypes, viewers' perceptions of Arabs may improve and take on a more accurate view of the world, and vice versa (Melham & Punyanunt-Carter, 2019).

Media Portrayals of Physical Disabilities

Gerbner's research of cultivation theory is relevant to the topic of physical disabilities and the media, because it concerns how television and cinematic portrayals shape others' realistic perceptions of the physically disabled. In his research on the media's role in portrayals of the disabled, Dahl (1993) states, "we have moved somewhat away from the disabled as hero or victim but we are still a long way from a normal depiction of disability" (p. 4). While Dahl (1993) references there have been changes in media portrayals, no research has been done that specifies what those changes are, or if the supercrip and victim concepts still largely dominate societal perceptions towards the physically disabled.

The impact the media has on others perceptions of actual reality has influenced the way disabled persons continue to be portrayed. Previous research by Elliott and Byrd (1984) noted that studied effects of portrayals of disability in the media on the attitudes of viewers are

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inconsistent. Dahl (1993) stated that the selective coverage of the disabled that does exist elicits a "heroes by hype" attitude. At the same time, Rees et al. (2019) noted these portrayals of the disability are often stereotyped evoking "emotions of pity, fear, and admiration." He continued, saying this cultivated attitude is not an exception for elite athletes with disabilities. In his content analysis of the 1996 Paralympic Games, he found athletes "were portrayed in a positive manner, but negative references remained" (Rees et. al, 2019, p.374). The author stated these attitudes are a "known barrier to participation for people with disability and media has a defining role in shaping this" (Rees et. al, 2019, p.374). Lynch and Thomas (1999) also acknowledged the media tendency to highlight the physically disabled in a way that emphasizes "their helplessness or their heroism" (p. 8).

Rees et. al (2019, p.378), under the assumption that most people are more comfortable with something that is not too different from their "norm", suggested that "some disabilities may be considered more ideal than others." Meaning, operating under this understanding, there are some disabilities that able-bodied persons are better or more comfortable confronting and engaging with than others. The author continued saying "blindness is considered more disturbing than paraplegia, arm amputation, and leg amputation consecutively" (Rees et. al, 2019, p.378).

Haller (2014) looked at how persons with disability felt about media portrayals of disabilities reporting that "results suggest the disabled survey respondents perceive that the news media don't give enough or balanced coverage to most disability issues overall" (p. 11). The author continued saying "on a scale from 1 to 7 (1 means not realistic at all and 7 means very realistic), the respondents indicated that the media's overall representations of people with disabilities were not realistic." Haller's findings also showed that the most prevalent models "reported were ones considered more stigmatizing (the Medical model, the Social Pathology

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model, the Supercrip model, and the Business model)" (Haller, 2014, p.11). Furthermore, the disabled don't feel the media portrays them "using progressive models (Minority/Civil Rights model, the Legal model, and the Cultural Pluralism model)" (Haller, 2014, p.11).

Dahl (1993) reported that most disabled persons "would prefer to be shown as part of the average population" (p. 3). However, the greater tendency of Hollywood films is to "sentimentalize the disabled with stock movies of two-dimensional characters who 'learn to cope' and 'live happily ever after'." Noting that characters of a variety of disabilities including deafness, blindness, and quadriplegia have all been approached and treated this way. On the other hand, Hollywood has also treated characters with disabilities as the helpless victims of their circumstances stating "the sad victims, confined to beds or wheelchairs dependent on the goodwill of others for every accomplishments [sic] in their lives, eliciting pity, charity, or both" (Lynch & Thomas, 1999, p.9). These authors continued saying Hollywood has not often covered issues such as discrimination and societal attitudes, but has placed more emphasis on stories of those who "overcame their disabilities while being constantly good-humored, patient and courageous." Dahl (1993, p.4) notes that the media have moved "somewhat away from the disabled as hero or victim but we are still a long way from a normal depiction of disability." Black & Pretes (2007, p.66) state the focus of filmmakers is not to promote accurate portrayals. They may instead promote "positive or negative images of individuals with disabilities."

Perceptions of Physical Disabilities

In their analysis of the perceptions of disabled persons based off of their portrayal in the media, previous research states "Attitudes towards person[s] with disabilities are predominantly negative throughout all facets of our society. Roeher pointed out that attitudes determine treatment of an individual" (Elliott & Byrd, 1982, p.348). Adam (2019) found similar attitudes in

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his research on the accommodations or lack thereof in the hotel industry for persons with disabilities.

Even with all the evidence from previous research that suggests that media messages impact attitudes, there are still contradicting beliefs on how strong that impact is. According to Dahl (1993, p.3) and his research on how portrayals in the media impacted others' image of the disabled the author stated "there is no evidence that the mass media have any major effect on manipulating the attitudes and opinions of its audience." He continued his dispute quoting previous authors (Howitt, 1989) who said that mass media influence is "tempered by a tendency of the public to neglect the mass media in favour of other sources of understanding social reality" (Dahl, 1993; Howitt, 1989, p. 179).

The effects that the mass media have been discovered to have on public attitudes towards persons with disabilities have included two main foci. These include the perceptions of what are known as the "supercrip" and the victim concept. Lynch and Thomas (1999) said of the ways the media portrays the disabled, often "people with disabilities are characterized either as victims, or as inspirational figures who overcame their disability by some miracle" (p. 8).

Furthermore, when it comes to the vast majority of physical ailments and disorders, most people are ignorant of these symptoms and the accurate nature of those bodily dysfunctions. Black and Pretes (2007) stated, "Movies offer people a way to explore the unfamiliar in a safe environment. Therefore, if someone has not had direct experience with individuals with various disabilities, film depictions may be his or her primary source of information" (p. 66). The authors continued, quoting Safran (2001) saying while movies have their element of entertainment the purpose they serve influencing perceptions is two-fold. They also "simultaneously provide viewers with information about disabilities, and, through the filmmaker's lens, they project

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representations of how individuals fit into a nation's social and political landscape" (Safran, 2001, p. 223).

Other authors suggest that the mass media do have a strong influence on attitudes and perceptions of the physically disabled. Susman (1994, p.18) said that what is portrayed in the media "perpetuate[s] ways of thinking about disabled persons." Black and Pretes (2007) also argued that the more this community is portrayed as dependent, or burdened, or objects of pity, the more likely others outside this group are to view them through this kind of lens. Furthermore, the portrayals of the disabled in the media also have an impact on the way these individuals feel about themselves (Norden, 1994).

The research of Black and Pretes (2007) also argues that trends in the film industry cultivate an attitude of ableism. The authors said the American Heritage Dictionary (2000) defines ableism as "discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities, especially physical disabilities" and holds many similarities to racism and sexism as well as other discriminatory practices. The researchers continue, stating these stereotypical representations of the physically disabled in the media perpetuate these attitudes and include a number of other stereotypes (Black & Pretes, 2007). This study, however, will focus on the two stereotypes: supercrip and victim concept.

However, despite findings on the above stereotypes, another study conducted by Farnall and Smith (1999) found in a sample 1200 adults, those who watch positive portrayals of characters with disabilities "were more likely to recognize discrimination against people with disabilities and less likely to say they had negative emotions when encountering people with disabilities" (Black & Pretes, 2007, p.79).

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Supercrip Stereotype

Clogston (1993) defined the supercrip mentality as "the disabled person is portrayed as deviant because of "superhuman" feats (i.e. ocean sailing blind man) or as 'special' because they live regular lives 'in spite of' disability (i.e. deaf high school student who plays softball)." Haller (2014, p.3) said this attitude reinforces the idea that the physically disabled about deviant and that "person's accomplishments are 'amazing' for someone who is less than complete." The author continued stating Covington (1988) says this mindset also causes problems because the media treat the individual as if he or she were "one-of-a-kind." While it does make for a better story, Covington (1988, p.1) argues "it perpetuates in the mind of the general public how rare it is for the disabled person to succeed." This circles back around to Dahl (1993, p.2) who acknowledged the rarity of disability being portrayed as the "norm". The author stated "rarely does there appear an average or ordinary person whose disability is incidental." Dahl (1993) in referencing a study done by Gardner and Radel (1978) stated that about one half of all the items analyzed by the researchers portrayed the disabled as dependent persons.

Victim Concept

Lynch and Thomas (1999, p. 8) stated in their research that "the search for sympathy for 'victims' of disease and disability is big business." Unfortunately, the prevalent message communicated to the general public doesn't emphasize the potential independence or individuality of the person. Rather, "the concept of a person with a disability as 'victim' is embedded in the public press and everyday conversations of the general public" (Lynch & Thomas, 1999, p.8). The authors continue saying the "emotionally-laden campaigns" that serve as pooling in donations for the disability groups are the "prime examples of promoting the victim concept." Because of this Lynch and Thomas (1999, p.8) said there have been protests that have

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argued the promotions of "destructive and untrue stereotypes of people with severe physical disabilities as child-like, non-contributing members of society whose only hope is to be cured."

Role Schema

Merriam-Webster defines schema as "a mental codification of experience that includes a particular organized way of perceiving cognitively and responding to a complex situation or set of stimuli" (Schema, n.d.). In other words, these are the mental "short-cuts" the mind takes to determine one's expectations on how a person or artifact should behave. Sheeran & Orbell (2019) argue "the best predictor of behavioural performance is the person's intention to perform the behaviour" (p. 534). Sheeran & Orbell (2019) continue, arguing that intentions are predicted by the constructs of attitudes and subjective norms. According to Lynch & Thomas (1999), the attitudes that others develop towards persons with disabilities "are largely the result of an interactive process" (p. 9). Finally, Sheeran & Orbell (2019) said that if discrepancies between intentions and behaviours exist, it is mostly "attributable to intenders who fail to act ('inclined abstainers') rather than non-intenders who perform the behaviour" (p. 545).

These topics give rise to a need to better understand modern attitudes towards physical disabilities cultivated by the mass media. To do this, it is necessary to pool the themes and perceptions of the general public across all mediums of communication. Specifically, social media and online discussion.

Aim of the Study

In summary, the most prevalent portrayals promoted by film and circulated in society don't add to the mindset of disability as a "norm." While Dahl (1993) suggested that movies are moving somewhat away from said attitudes including, but not limited to supercrip and victim concept, as far as current and previous research shows it is not clear what those changes are. This

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gives motivation to study the change in physical disability portrayals in film over time.

Therefore, the purpose of this study will focus on the following research questions:

RQ1: What perceptions of the physically disabled are portrayed in film?

RQ2: Are supercrip and victim concept still the most prevalent perceptions?

RQ3: How have portrayals of the physically disabled shifted over time?

Method

The data for this study was collected using content analysis methodology. The collective content being analyzed was taken from the top 50 grossing films between the years 1989 and 2019, referencing boxofficemojo.com for these top performing productions. This purpose of this quantitative method is to provide further understanding of the portrayals of the physically disabled in the media and how they have shifted over time. For the purpose of this study, the analysis focused on the films in this time period that included physically disabled characters in either the main or supporting character roles. The goal of this study is to determine if the portrayals of the physically disabled have shifted in a positive direction, negative direction, or remained the same.

Variable of Interest

A coding sheet was constructed for this study for the purposes of examining the portrayals of the physically disabled in the media. Operational definitions for variables of interest are outlined below.

Content

Content for this analysis was taken from the top 50 grossing films between the years 1989-2019 using boxofficemojo.com as a reference for these top performing films, to provide an overview of how portrayals of the physically disabled have shifted from over time. The time period of 30 years and the top 50 grossing films from each year resulted in a pool of 1500 films.

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The initial 1500 films were screened for all productions that included portrayals of physical disability in the main or supporting character roles. This was done using plot summaries of each film from Wikipedia.org. If the character's disability was included as an important element to the plot of the film or to the character's role, it was kept for further analysis.

There is no specification between gender, race, or age of the characters. All cinematic genres were included in this research analysis. For the purpose of this study, in this 30-year period, it was determined there was a total 79 films that have a physically disabled character in the main and/or supporting roles.

A coding sheet was developed to categorize the interactions between the characters of focus and other roles in the film. Two coders analyzed each film for each incidence where the character was impacted by verbal, non-verbal, and physical actions of others.

The coding sheet categorized and noted the presence of both nominal and scale variables. Each film's character and disability was categorized for the following: type of role, gender, cause of disability, category of disability, race, and whether or not the character was Hispanic.

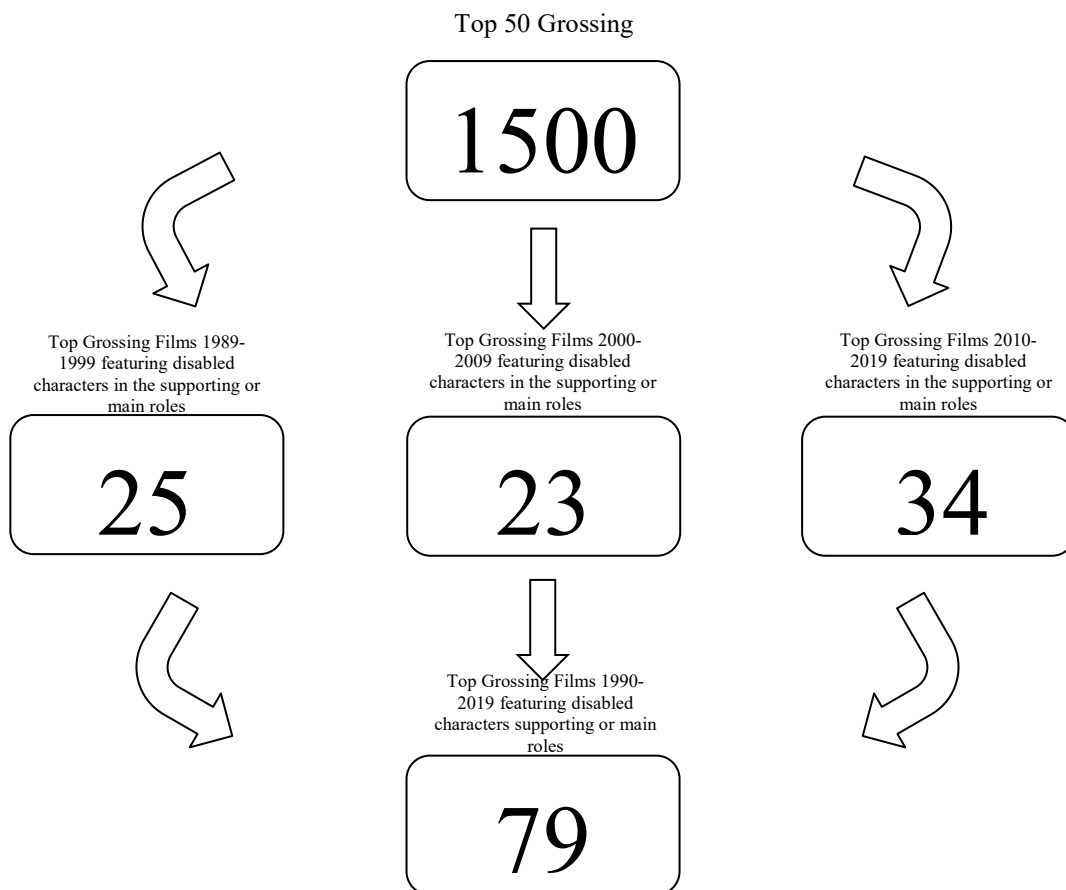
There was a content analysis, and thus did not involve data collection from human subjects. The coders were trained on how to identify physically disabled characters and code for very positive, positive, neutral, negative, and very negative interactions. They were also trained on how to identify an incidence as a portrayal of supercrip or victim concept, or if there was no presence of either.

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Figure 1

Top Grossing Films Flowchart

Flowchart showing narrowing process of top grossing films 1989 – 2019 to sample.



Films excluded

Certain films from the initial list of top grossing films were omitted due to not meeting all the criteria. These films were *Total Recall*, *Glory*, and *Me, Myself & Irene*. In *Total Recall* character labeled as deformed is actually a host body for another organism, not a person suffering from abnormal deformity themselves. In *Glory*, the character that is singled out as abnormal is a young boy who is mute. Muteness was not included in the definition of a physical

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disability due to the rather psychological nature of the affliction. The final film excluded from the official coding list, *Me, Myself, & Irene* was omitted because while the character that appears does have dwarfism, the character's case of dwarfism has nothing to do with the plot of the film, nor is dwarfism crucial to their role in the moment they appear in the film.

Measures

Information from this content analysis was categorized quantitatively to determine if cinematic portrayals of the physically disabled have shifted in a more positive direction, a negative direction, or if the perceptions of the disabled have remained the same. A coding sheet developed using information from similar content analysis studies was used to categorize the interaction of physically disabled characters and other characters in the films as either very negative, negative, neutral, positive, or very positive.

Interactions

For the purposes of this study an interaction is defined as an instance where the disabled character interacts with at least one other character in the scene. In the case additional persons enter in the same scene, this would be considered a new interaction.

Tone (Emotional valence)

This study categorized interactions in a five-point scale using very positive, positive, neutral, negative, and very negative. An interaction was considered very positive where the disabled character is treated in a respectful manner, and included in conversation and/or activity. Attitude and language towards them is uplifting, encouraging, and builds the individual's sense of self-worth and esteem. For example, Ivy Walker, in the 2004 production of *The Village* is blind, but she is looked on as a positive role model and example throughout the film, and is even a pivotal figure in saving the lives of the villagers towards the end of the story. An interaction

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was considered positive when the character is respected, and any help or assistance they did receive due to their disability was not spoken of as burdensome. For example, Jamie Foxx's portrayal of Ray Charles in the 2004 production of *Ray*. His character is respected by his peers and fans, and assistance is offered where needed, but said assistance is never thought of as inconvenient and his talent is not belittled because of his blindness. A neutral interaction was where the disabled character was included in conversation and activity without their disability being considered at all, or where it is not considered as a hindrance. For example, in the 1996 production of *Star Trek: First Contact* the character and crew member, Geordi, is blind, but this fact is never mentioned or considered in his ability to contribute to the missions and duties of the starship Enterprise. He is treated just like any other member of the crew. An interaction was considered negative when the disabled character's disability was brought up as a potential hindrance to their ability to contribute as a person of value, or when even well-meaning persons insisted on helping the individual despite their objections and own insistence that the aid was not necessary. For example, Regan Abbott, in the 2018 production of *The Quiet Place* is deaf. At a certain moment in the film, Regan's father and brother leave to gather food, and Regan expresses resistance and resentment when her father insists she remain home with her pregnant mother to help her and keep her safe. However, Regan knows at least part of the reason for her father's insistence is because she is deaf and is worried about her inability to hear, affecting her ability to take effective precautions while traveling outdoors. Thus, endangering the objective of their excursion. Finally, an interaction was considered very negative where the disabled person was spoken to or treated in a condescending manner. Words and actions have a hurtful, damaging, or otherwise harmful effect on the disabled character where their credibility as a person of value is undermined. For example, Robin William's character with autosomal recessive disorder in the

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1996 film *Jack* is teased and belittled, because his character is a young child that looks like a middle-aged man.

Other categories being analyzed in this study are gender, existence of assistant devices (or lack thereof), race, category of physical disability, and cause of disability. For the purposes of this study race is categorized between White, Black, Native American, and Asian. Category of disability is separated as follows: physical, visual, neural, auditory, and genetic. Finally, cause of disability is distinguished between congenital and postnatal, and unknown.

Intercoder Reliability

To obtain intercoder reliability, two independent coders were trained prior to data collection. This training included (1) identification of a physical disability (2) identification of supercrip and victim concept stereotypes (3) identification of perceptions and tones used in the 5-point scale (4) instruction on identifying a situation as an “incident”. Coders analyzed 15 (18.9%) of the films ($N = 79$). After coding was completed, coders discussed discrepancies and coded the remaining movies. A Cohen’s Kappa reliability was performed on each film’s coding results. See Appendix 1, 2, and 3 for reference.

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Results

A series of tests were performed to determine the significance and relationships between tone, perception, decade, and other variables examined below. See Figures 2 through 8 for reference.

One-Way ANOVA - Bonferroni

RQ1 asks, what perceptions of the physically disabled are portrayed in the media? To answer this question One-way ANOVA - Bonferroni was performed to determine if there was significance in tone or perception of portrayals. Results indicated that there was no significant difference found in very negative or positive portrayals. Similarly, portrayals of supercrip approached significance (see Table 1).

Significance was found performing a One-Way ANOVA in Negative ($F = 3.215, p = .046$), Neutral ($F = 26.922, p = .000$), Very Positive ($F = 3.43, p = .037$), Victim ($F = 8.044, p = .001$), and None/Other ($F = 21.716, p = .000$) portrayals. The means between the 90s ($M = 0.3629$) and 10s ($M = 0.23717$) approached significance ($p = .076$), indicating the number of negative portrayals decreasing over time. There was no significance found between the 90s and the 10s

Similarly, significance was found in neutrals portrayals between the 90s ($M = 0.48493$) and both the 00s ($M = 0.7731$) and 10s ($M = 0.87814$). These means indicated an increase in neutral portrayals of disability over time.

Significance was indicated in very positive portrayals between the 90s ($M = 0.09921$) and 10s ($M = 0.22592$), showing a noticeable increase in very positive portrayals over time. Interestingly, there was also a positive significance found in victim portrayals between the 90s ($M = 0.5069$) and both the 00s ($M = 0.28349$) and 10s ($M = 0.23612$), indicating an increase in victim portrayals.

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The results of this One-Way ANOVA found a positive significance between NONE portrayals between the 90s ($M = 0.41635$) and both the 00s ($M = 0.68449$) and the 10s ($M = 0.85391$) as well. These differences in mean indicated an increase in disability portrayals that were not categorized as supercrip or victim.

Table 1

Oneway ANOVA - Bonferroni Tone and perception by decade

Dependent Variable	(I) Decade	(J) Decade	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Very Negative	90s	00s	0.006813	0.041796	1	-0.09551	0.10913
		10s	-0.05371	0.03717	0.458	-0.14471	0.03729
	00s	90s	-0.006813	0.041796	1	-0.10913	0.09551
		10s	-0.060523	0.038223	0.352	-0.1541	0.03305
	10s	90s	0.05371	0.03717	0.458	-0.03729	0.14471
		00s	0.060523	0.038223	0.352	-0.03305	0.1541
Negative	90s	00s	0.133803	0.06198	0.102	-0.01793	0.28554
		10s	0.125735	0.055121	0.076	-0.00921	0.26068
	00s	90s	-0.133803	0.06198	0.102	-0.28554	0.01793
		10s	-0.008068	0.056683	1	-0.14683	0.1307
	10s	90s	-0.125735	0.055121	0.076	-0.26068	0.00921
		00s	0.008068	0.056683	1	-0.1307	0.14683
Neutral	90s	00s	-.288167*	0.060813	0	-0.43704	-0.13929
		10s	-.393205*	0.054083	0	-0.52561	-0.2608
	00s	90s	.288167*	0.060813	0	0.13929	0.43704
		10s	-0.105038	0.055615	0.188	-0.24119	0.03111
	10s	90s	.393205*	0.054083	0	0.2608	0.52561
		00s	0.105038	0.055615	0.188	-0.03111	0.24119
Positive	90s	00s	0.129075	0.066962	0.173	-0.03485	0.29301
		10s	0.073557	0.059551	0.662	-0.07223	0.21934

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	00s	90s	-0.129075	0.066962	0.173	-0.29301	0.03485
		10s	-0.055519	0.061238	1	-0.20544	0.0944
	10s	90s	-0.073557	0.059551	0.662	-0.21934	0.07223
		00s	0.055519	0.061238	1	-0.0944	0.20544
Very Positive	90s	00s	-0.079535	0.05442	0.444	-0.21276	0.05369
		10s	-.126713*	0.048398	0.032	-0.2452	-0.00823
	00s	90s	0.079535	0.05442	0.444	-0.05369	0.21276
		10s	-0.047179	0.049769	1	-0.16902	0.07466
	10s	90s	.126713*	0.048398	0.032	0.00823	0.2452
		00s	0.047179	0.049769	1	-0.07466	0.16902
Supercrip	90s	00s	-0.009831	0.063484	1	-0.16525	0.14559
		10s	0.07128	0.056458	0.632	-0.06694	0.2095
	00s	90s	0.009831	0.063484	1	-0.14559	0.16525
		10s	0.081111	0.058058	0.499	-0.06102	0.22324
	10s	90s	-0.07128	0.056458	0.632	-0.2095	0.06694
		00s	-0.081111	0.058058	0.499	-0.22324	0.06102
Victim	90s	00s	.223405*	0.077953	0.016	0.03257	0.41424
		10s	.270781*	0.069326	0.001	0.10106	0.4405
	00s	90s	-.223405*	0.077953	0.016	-0.41424	-0.03257
		10s	0.047376	0.071291	1	-0.12715	0.2219
	10s	90s	-.270781*	0.069326	0.001	-0.4405	-0.10106
		00s	-0.047376	0.071291	1	-0.2219	0.12715
None/Other	90s	00s	-.268149*	0.074661	0.002	-0.45093	-0.08537
		10s	-.437564*	0.066398	0	-0.60011	-0.27501
	00s	90s	.268149*	0.074661	0.002	0.08537	0.45093
		10s	-.169415*	0.068279	0.046	-0.33657	-0.00226
	10s	90s	.437564*	0.066398	0	0.27501	0.60011
		00s	.169415*	0.068279	0.046	0.00226	0.33657

Note. Multiple comparisons among variables. $N=79$

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

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Bivariate Correlation Matrix

As RQ2 asked if supercrip and victim are still the most prevalent portrayals, and RQ3 asks how these portrayals have shifted over time.

A bivariate correlation was performed to compare the year the movie was released to tone and perception (see Table 2). In this case, there is a significant positive relationship between the year the movie was released and neutral ($r = .612, p = .000$), very positive ($r = .327, p = .003$) and none/other portrayals ($r = .632, p = .000$) such that as the time went on there were more of these types of interactions. A significant inverse relationship was found between year of movie and victim portrayals ($r = -.404, p = .000$), such that as time went on there were fewer portrayals of victim concept. However, as indicated previously, it was found that as over time victim portrayals increased. These figures indicate that supercrip is becoming less of a commonality, but that victim concept portrayals are still prevalent.

An intermediate positive relationship was found between victim concept and negative portrayals ($r = .322, p = .004$), indicating that more portrayals of victim concept were also negative. A small inverse relationship was found approaching significance between none/other and negative ($r = -.203, p = .073$) such that there was some indication that as none/other portrayals increased, negative tones in these portrayals decreased.

Similarly, a strong inverse relationship was found between neutral and victim concept portrayals ($r = -.540, p = .000$) indicating that the more victim concept was portrayed the fewer interactions were found to be neutral. A strong positive relationship was found between none/other and neutral portrayals ($r = .609, p = .000$), such that an increase in none/other portrayals indicated and increase in neutral portrayals. Inverse relationships were found between none/other and supercrip ($r = -.320, p = .006$) and victim portrayals ($r = -.815, p = .004$) such

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that the increase in these perceptions in portrayals indicated a decrease in the presence of none/other portrayals.

A small positive relationship was found between negative and very negative portrayals ($r = .303, p = .007$) such that the increase of one indicated the increase of the other as well. A small inverse relationship was found between neutral and negative portrayals ($r = -.345, p = .002$) indicating an increase of neutral portrayals often correlated with a decrease in negative portrayals. A small positive relationship was found between very positive and positive portrayals ($r = .293, p = .009$) such that an increase in one often indicated an increase in the other.

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations Matrix

	Year of movie	Number of interactions	VN	N	Neut.	P	VP	Sup	Vic	NONE
Year of movie										
Number of interactions										
VN										
N										
Neut.										
P										
VP										
Sup										
Vic										
NONE										

Note. Note. Tone and Perception labels are Very Negative (VN), Negative (N), Neutral (Neut.), Positive (P), Very Positive (VP), Supercrip (Sup), Victim (Vic), and NONE. Bivariate correlations among variables. $N=79$

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

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Portrayal shifts between decades

Other findings indicated an increase in the percentage of main characters roles displaying a character with a disability over time, which a slight decrease between the 00s and the 10s, though overall percentage of main characters portrayals with physical disabilities, increased over time (see Table 3). There was also a similar pattern found in supporting roles portraying characters with physical disabilities.

Data analysis also found that over time, portrayals of characters with physical disabilities using assistive devices also increased steadily through the decades (see Table 5). Interestingly, the number of characters portraying a person with a congenitally caused disorder decreased from the 90s to the 00s and 10s, while portrayals of disabled characters with disabilities caused by postnatal incidents increased (see Table 6). Findings also indicated an increase in portrayals of characters with disabilities that afflicted the individual's motor abilities, or caused atypical anatomical development (see Table 7), however there was a decrease in the number of portrayals of characters with visual or auditory impairment.

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Table 3

Decade Crosstabulation between main and supporting roles

		Decade			
		90s	00s	10s	Total
main	Count	9	11	18	38
	% within Are they a main or supporting	23.70%	28.90%	47.40%	100.00%
	% within Decade	39.10%	52.40%	51.40%	48.10%
	% of Total	11.40%	13.90%	22.80%	48.10%
supporting	Count	14	10	17	41
	% within Are they a main or supporting	34.10%	24.40%	41.50%	100.00%
	% within Decade	60.90%	47.60%	48.60%	51.90%
	% of Total	17.70%	12.70%	21.50%	51.90%
Total	Count	23	21	35	79
	% within Are they a main or supporting	29.10%	26.60%	44.30%	100.00%
	% within Decade	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
	% of Total	29.10%	26.60%	44.30%	100.00%

Note. Percentage of portrayals between main and supporting. *N*=79

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Table 4

Crosstabulation of assistant device use

		Decade			
		90s	00s	10s	Total
yes	Count	14	14	26	54
	% within Do they use an assistive device?	25.90%	25.90%	48.10%	100.00%
	% within Decade	60.90%	66.70%	74.30%	68.40%
	% of Total	17.70%	17.70%	32.90%	68.40%
no	Count	9	7	9	25
	% within Do they use an assistive device?	36.00%	28.00%	36.00%	100.00%
	% within Decade	39.10%	33.30%	25.70%	31.60%
	% of Total	11.40%	8.90%	11.40%	31.60%
Total	Count	23	21	35	79
	% within Do they use an assistive device?	29.10%	26.60%	44.30%	100.00%
	% within Decade	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
	% of Total	29.10%	26.60%	44.30%	100.00%

Note. Crosstabulation of assistance device use in portrayals. *N*=79

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Table 5

Crosstabulation of Cause of disability

		Decade			Total
		90s	00s	10s	
congenital	Count	10	8	8	26
	% within Cause of disability.	38.50%	30.80%	30.80%	100.00%
	% within Decade	43.50%	38.10%	22.90%	32.90%
	% of Total	12.70%	10.10%	10.10%	32.90%
postnatal	Count	13	13	26	52
	% within Cause of disability.	25.00%	25.00%	50.00%	100.00%
	% within Decade	56.50%	61.90%	74.30%	65.80%
	% of Total	16.50%	16.50%	32.90%	65.80%
unknown	Count	0	0	1	1
	% within Cause of disability.	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	100.00%
	% within Decade	0.00%	0.00%	2.90%	1.30%
	% of Total	0.00%	0.00%	1.30%	1.30%
Total	Count	23	21	35	79
	% within Cause of disability.	29.10%	26.60%	44.30%	100.00%
	% within Decade	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
	% of Total	29.10%	26.60%	44.30%	100.00%

Note. Crosstabulation of cause of disability by decade. *N*=79

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Table 6

Crosstabulation of Category of disability

		Decade			
		90s	00s	10s	Total
physical	Count	11	18	29	58
	% within Category of disability.	19.00%	31.00%	50.00%	100.00%
	% within Decade	47.80%	85.70%	82.90%	73.40%
	% of Total	13.90%	22.80%	36.70%	73.40%
visual	Count	7	3	4	14
	% within Category of disability.	50.00%	21.40%	28.60%	100.00%
	% within Decade	30.40%	14.30%	11.40%	17.70%
	% of Total	8.90%	3.80%	5.10%	17.70%
neural	Count	2	0	1	3
	% within Category of disability.	66.70%	0.00%	33.30%	100.00%
	% within Decade	8.70%	0.00%	2.90%	3.80%
	% of Total	2.50%	0.00%	1.30%	3.80%
auditory	Count	3	0	1	4
	% within Category of disability.	75.00%	0.00%	25.00%	100.00%
	% within Decade	13.00%	0.00%	2.90%	5.10%
	% of Total	3.80%	0.00%	1.30%	5.10%
Total	Count	23	21	35	79
	% within Category of disability.	29.10%	26.60%	44.30%	100.00%
	% within Decade	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
	% of Total	29.10%	26.60%	44.30%	100.00%

Note. Crosstabulation of category of disability between decades. $N=79$

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Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if supercrip and victim concept stereotypes were still prevalent in media portrayals of the physically disabled, and what shifts in media portrayals had occurred based on the prior research of Dahl (1993). Results found that while there have been changes in cinematic media portrayals of the physically disabled, portrayals seem to have shifted from one extreme to the other.

RQ1 asks what perceptions of the physically disabled are portrayed in the media. Results showed a significant increase in neutral and very positive portrayals over time, however victim concept portrayals have also simultaneously risen. This shows a movement away from supercrip stereotype, and portraying the physically disabled as exceptional. Though portrayals have neutralized more in tone, perceptions seem to have swung in the other direction increasingly showing that the individual's quality of life is still lesser than ideal. Dahl (1993) suggested in his research that while many social terms and jargon painted a burdensome view of the disabled, there had been some changes in the American films that presented a more sympathetic and romanticized view of the disabled. Findings from this content analysis validate findings from Dahl's study that portrayals have changed to present a more sympathetic view of the physically disabled. However, this increasingly sympathetic view seems to have come with the trade of showing the disabled as victims of their circumstances that depend on the generosity of their community, rather than individuals that are exceptional for exceeding stigmatized expectations of their conditions.

RQ2 asks if supercrip and victim concept are still the most prevalent portrayals in film. As previously stated, findings indicated that there has been a notable shift from supercrip and negative portrayals to more neutral and very positive portrayals, while simultaneously victim portrayals have also risen. This indicates that between supercrip and victim concept, there has

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been a shift in prevalence. While these two perceptions are still the most notable, victim concept seems to be most prevalent in modern film portrayals.

The more the physically disabled are shown as victims of their own circumstances, the more this could potentially have a negative impact on others' views of the value in society a physically disabled person contributes and possibly lessen their quality of life further still. Black and Pretes (2007) stated that movies offer others "a way to explore the unfamiliar in a safe environment" (p.66) and may stand as their primary source of information. Being that is the case, in regards to physical disabilities, the results of this study suggest that media portrayals can and do have an effect on people's perceptions. When movie portrayals are an individual's primary source of information for a topic they are otherwise uninformed of, this lays the foundation for misconceptions and stigmatized attitudes towards persons with physical disabilities. Melham and Punyanunt-Carter (2019) have also indicated that studies have shown portrayals do have an effect on viewers' beliefs. The interaction processes displayed on the movie screen gives viewers an impression of how they need or should engage with persons with physical disabilities. It makes that one would fashion their attitudes and behaviors with the physically disabled after those portrayed in those films or other media that served as their source of information on the disability.

Findings also showed a decrease in portrayals of persons with a congenital disability over time. This could be part of the reason for neutralized tones of portrayals. As Lynch and Thomas (1999) indicated in their research the attitudes developed towards persons with disabilities is largely connected to the interactive process. As the authors mention in their research, the prevalent message embedded in campaigns and media to the public "doesn't emphasize the potential independence or individuality of the person" (p. 8), but emphasizes a victim status on

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persons with disabilities. The authors stated that this kind of messaging serves as a prime example of promoting the victim concept. This decrease in portrayals of congenital disabilities could show a lack of understanding of interactions with congenital disabilities, or perhaps that persons with congenital disabilities are inherently seen more as victims, thus decreasing their presence on the silver screen rather than see these portrayals neutralize with other perceptions.

Findings also showed there were more portrayals of the physically disabled with assistive devices than without. This factor could potentially have some influence on the persistent victim concept perception of the portrayals, despite the fact that the tone of these portrayals has improved over time. By showing more disabled characters with assistive devices, this may feed the perception that a person who is disabled requires assistance to be successful. Black and Pretes (2007) research argues that the trends in the film industry have cultivated an attitude of ableism, or the "discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities, especially physical disabilities" that hold many similarities to racism and sexism. The persistence of character portrayals with assistive devices could give the impression that one with a physical disability requires some kind of assistance in order for them to function properly. This notion may foster an attitude towards the physically disabled that they are a burden either to themselves or others due to this anticipated need for assistance. While this majority presence of assistive devices does not directly indicate such prevalence, future researchers could look at the influence the presence of these devices has on the development of attitudes and subjective norms.

Results showed there was a significantly greater number of male portrayals than female portrayals. However, there was no significance found in difference in tone or perception portrayed between gender.

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Finally, RQ3 asked if there had been a shift in portrayals over time. Findings of this study indicate that there has been notable motion in all variables over the past 30 years. As previously stated, the pendulum has shifted from one extreme to the other. Instead of physically disabled individuals being seen as exceptional for their ability to adapt to their circumstances and function normally, more modern portrayals, as indicated by Dahl (1993) present the physically disabled in a more sympathetic and romanticized light. This shift may be seen as a form of progress, however any extreme has its cons. With a greater emphasis on persons with physical disabilities as very positive and victim, while the positive nature of the portrayal has its benefits, disabled characters being portrayed as victims could foster an attitude of pity towards those whose circumstances are atypical. Dahl (1993) stated in his research that most disabled people would prefer to be shown as part of the average population.

Ultimately, portrayals in film have an impact on peoples' views (Melham and Punyanunt-Carter, 2019), and for many that do not have a direct experience with a person(s) with a physical disability, film often serves as their primary source of information (Black and Pretes, 2007). It is important to study the influence and impact film has on the disabled community, because these perceptions shaped by film portrayals affect the quality of life for physically disabled individuals, including the kinds of opportunities they have for both occupation and recreation.

Limitations

Limitations presented in this study include the timeframe in which the sample of films was taken from, and as that this analysis focused mainly on the perceptions of supercrip and stereotype. Other perceptions may exist, and future researchers could look further into these other attitudes, however, one of the purposes of this study being the prevalence (or lack thereof) of supercrip and victim concept, this was intentional.

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Future Research

Future research could examine what attitudes exist towards the physically disabled and how much media influenced the development of these attitudes. They could also look into how constructs of attitudes and subjective norms contribute to the perceptions of others towards the physically disabled, and how the "interactive process" impacts the development of these attitudes. Understanding not only the effects of media consumption but how strongly they influence attitudes towards the physically disabled will be beneficial in addressing issues concerning inaccurate understanding of various physical disabilities, and how these perceptions impact the physically disabled community's quality of life.

Conclusion

Portrayals in the media have an impact on the viewers' perceptions. The most prevalent messages in the previous media have cultivated an attitude that disabled are victims, though there have been shifts in these perceptions.

The primary goal of this study was to determine what shifts in portrayals of the physically disabled had occurred over the past three decades. Findings indicated that portrayals have decreased in the number of supercrip stereotype, but have increased in neutral, very positive, and victim concept. Results also indicated that there has been a significant decrease in the number of portrayals of congenital disabilities, and that there is also a bigger prevalence of physical disabilities that do not impair the visual or auditory functions. Results also showed a bigger presence of portrayals of physically disabled with assistive devices.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1

Tone and Perception Coding Reliability by Film Title and Decade (90s)

Born on the Fourth of July	<i>VN</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Neut.</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>VP</i>	<i>Sup</i>	<i>Vic</i>	<i>NONE</i>
Percentage Agreement	98	95.9	95.9	89.8	98	100	93.9	93.9
Cohen's Kappa	0.939	0.917	0.912	0.783	0.929	1	0.878	0.878
Mr. Holland's Opus								
Percent Agreement	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	94.1
Cohen's Kappa	1	1	1	1	1	UD	1	0.883
The Horse Whisperer								
Percent Agreement	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Cohen's Kappa	UD	1	1	1	1	UD	1	1
The Bone Collector								
Percentage Agreement	100	100	100	94.7	100	100	100	100
Cohen's Kappa	1	1	1	0.883	1	UD	1	1

Note. Tone and Perception labels are Very Negative (VN), Negative (N), Neutral (Neut.), Positive (P), Very Positive (VP), Supercrip (Sup), Victim (Vic), and NONE. Other terms: Undefined (UD).

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Appendix 2

Tone and Perception Coding Reliability by Film Title and Decade (00s)

Unbreakable	<i>VN</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Neut.</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>VP</i>	<i>Sup</i>	<i>Vic</i>	<i>NONE</i>
Percentage Agreement	100	100	100	100	100	100	92.9	100
Cohen's Kappa	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.837	1
Daredevil								
Percent Agreement	100	100	97	97	100	93.9	97	97
Cohen's Kappa	1	1	0.872	0.939	1	0.874	0.921	0.914
X2: United								
Percentage Agreement	95	100	95	95	100	100	100	100
Cohen's Kappa	0.857	1	0.773	0.898	UD	1	1	1
The Village								
Percent Agreement	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Cohen's Kappa	1	1	UD	1	1	1	1	UD
Xmen: The Last Stand								
Percent Agreement	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Cohen's Kappa	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Note. Tone and Perception labels are Very Negative (VN), Negative (N), Neutral (Neut.), Positive (P), Very Positive (VP), Supercrip (Sup), Victim (Vic), and NONE. Other terms: Undefined (UD).

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Appendix 3

Tone and Perception Coding Reliability by Film Title and Decade (10s)

Book of Eli	<i>VN</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Neut.</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>VP</i>	<i>Sup</i>	<i>Vic</i>	<i>NONE</i>
Percent Agreement	100	100	100	87.5	87.5	100	100	100
Cohen's Kappa	1	1	1	0.75	0.714	1	1	1
Rogue One								
Percentage Agreement	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Cohen's Kappa	1	1	UD	1	1	1	1	UD
Annabelle Creation								
Percent Agreement	100	95	95	100	95	95	95	100
Cohen's Kappa	1	0.886	0.875	1	0.875	0.773	0.894	1
The Quiet Place								
Percentage Agreement	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Cohen's Kappa	1	1	1	1	1	UD	1	1
The Upside								
Percentage Agreement	100	100	100	100	100	100	97.6	100
Cohen's Kappa	UD	1	1	1	1	UD	0.949	1

Note. Tone and Perception labels are Very Negative (VN), Negative (N), Neutral (Neut.), Positive (P), Very Positive (VP), Supercrip (Sup), Victim (Vic), and NONE. Other terms: Undefined (UD).

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Appendix 4

Coding sheet

Title of Film: _____ **Coder:** _____

Disabled main (1) or supporting character (2): _____

Disability: _____

Assistant Device?: __ Yes(1) __ No(2)

If yes, device used: _____

Cause of disability: __ Congenital(1) __ Postnatal(2) __ Unknown(3)

Category of disability: __ Physical(1) __ Visual(2) __ Neural(3) __ Auditory(4) __ Genetic(5)

Gender: __ Female(1) __ Male(2)

Age: _____

Race: __ White(1) __ Black(2) __ Native American(3) __ Asian(4)

Hispanic/Latinx?: __ Yes(1) __ No(2)

Interaction 1 (timestamp): _____

Tone of interaction: __ Very negative(5) __ Negative(4) __ Neutral(3) __ Positive(2) __ Very positive(1)

Overall Perception type: __ Supercrip(1) __ Victim Concept(2) __ NONE(3)

Definitions

Interaction: A scene in with any number of people including the disabled character are actively engaged with one another in action and/or conversation. If other characters enter the scene, this is considered a new interaction.

Very positive (tone): The disabled character is treated in a respectful manner, and included in conversation and/or activity. Attitude and language towards them is uplifting, encouraging, and builds the individual's sense of self-worth and esteem (i.e. hug, kiss, smile, compliment, joyful laughter, "Nice to meet you").

Positive (tone): The disabled character is respected, and any help or assistance they do receive due to their disability is not spoken of as burdensome (i.e. character is speaking and listened to, their feelings and thoughts are considered or taken as valid, helping them out of bed, holding the door, feeding them).

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Neutral (tone): The disabled character is included in conversation and activity without their disability being considered at all, or where it is not considered as a hindrance (i.e. talking in conversation with no mention of disability, walking along them in their wheelchair without pushing them, inviting them to participate in activity with no mention of disability, or tone of pity, character is treated with attitude of normalcy).

Negative (tone): The disabled character's disability is brought up as a potential hindrance to their ability to contribute as a person of value, or when even a well-meaning person insists on helping the individual despite their own objections and insistence that the aid is not necessary. Or any time the character is spoken to in a patronizing or demeaning manner. (i.e. help needed is thought of as annoying, character is put down or insulted in an indirect manner, disabled insists they don't need help but are given assistance anyway, and well-intended gesture that is ill-received by the disabled).

Very Negative (tone): The disabled person is spoken to or treated in a condescending manner. Words and actions have a hurtful, damaging, or otherwise harmful effect on the disabled character where their credibility as a person of value is undermined. Or any time the character is spoken to in a patronizing or demeaning manner where the intention is to bring the character down and make them feel less valuable or worthless. (i.e. physical violence, name calling)

Congenital: Contracted or caused at birth, or prenatal.

Postnatal: Contracted or caused at any point in time after birth.

Auditory: Of or relating to hearing.

Physical: Of or relating to the body's motor abilities and coordination (i.e. muscular)

Visual: Of or relating to sight, or eyes.

Genetic: Of or relating to genes or DNA (i.e. genetic mutation or coding that causes the disorder).

Neural: Of or relating to the nervous system.

Assistant device: Any tool or mechanism the disabled person uses to improve or aid their practical functionality.

Asian: A person whose physical traits originate from countries in the Eastern hemisphere (China, Japan, Korea, etc.).

Black: A person whose physical traits resemble one of African descent, or whose biological traits can otherwise be identified as Black.

White: A person whose physical traits resemble one of European or English descent, or whose biological traits can otherwise be identified as White.

Native American: A person whose physical traits originate from or are characteristic of any indigenous North American tribes (i.e. Navajo, Cherokee).

Hispanic/Latinx: Of Latin American descent.

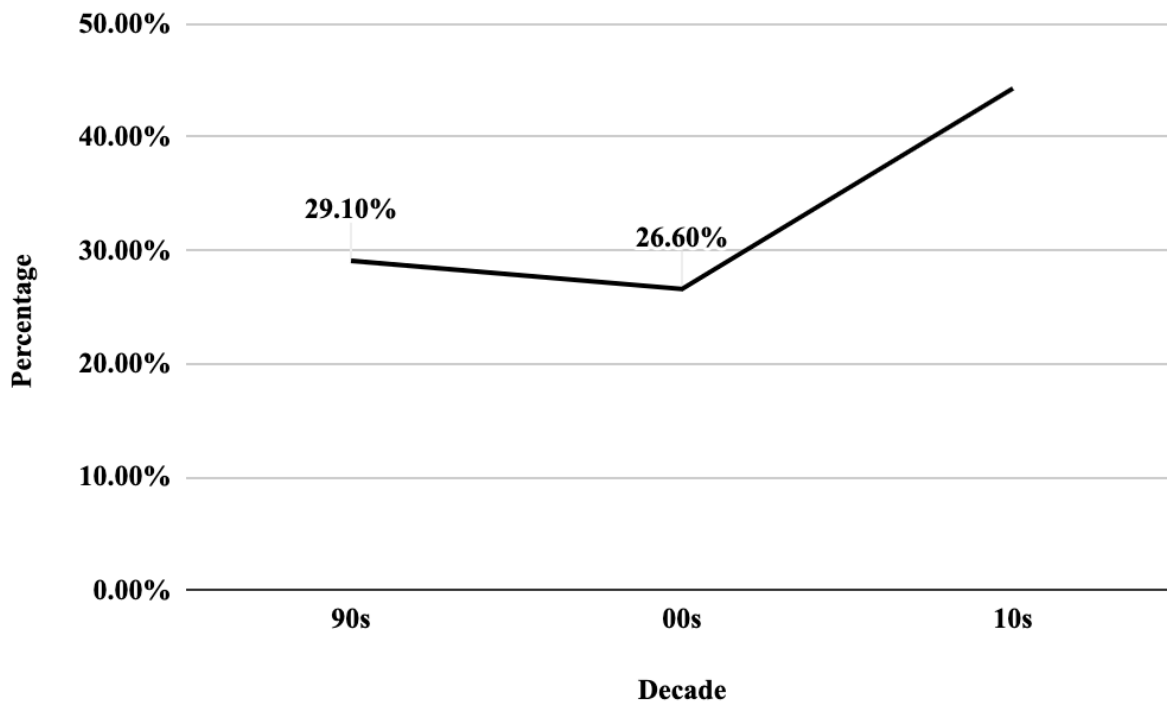
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Supercrip: The disabled character is seen as exceptional or inspirational, because they function so "normally" despite their disability. Or any time a disabled character is praised or given recognition.

Victim: The disabled character is seen as a burden to themselves or others, because of their disability. Any time the disabled character is treated less than, or looked down on because their quality of life or value as a person is assumed inhibited by their disability. Also anytime the character is seen as unable to help themselves.

Figure 2

Percentage of disability portrayals by decade

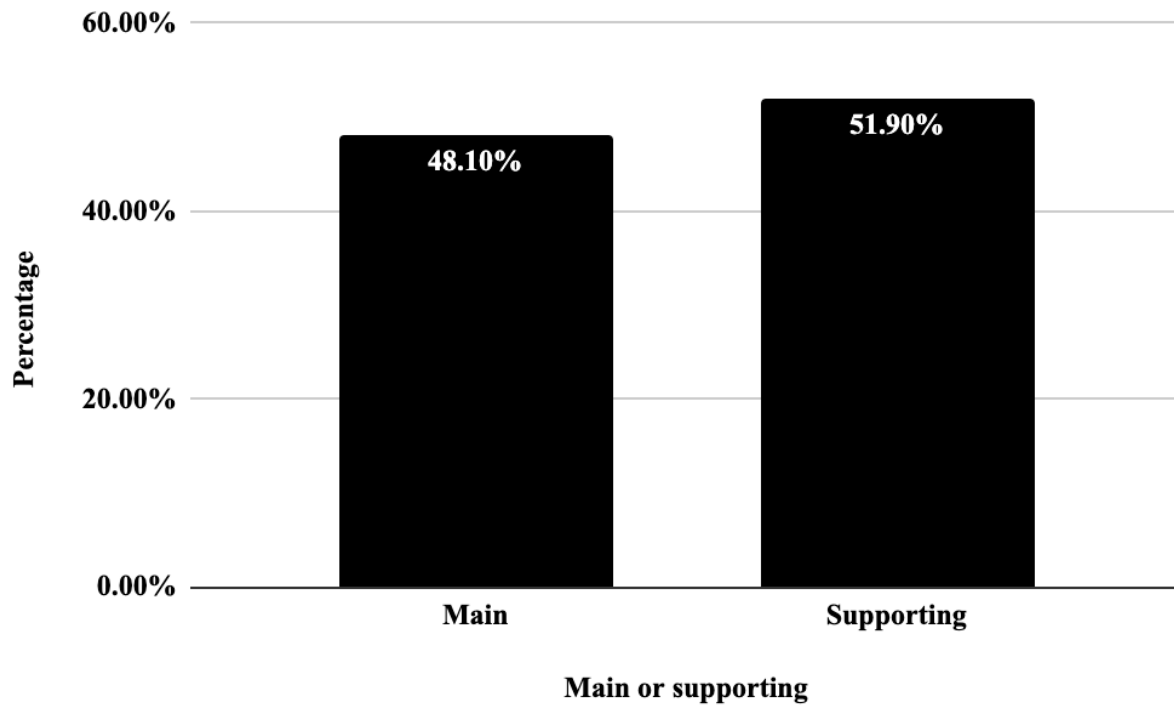


Note. $N = 79$

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Figure 3

Percentage between main and supporting roles

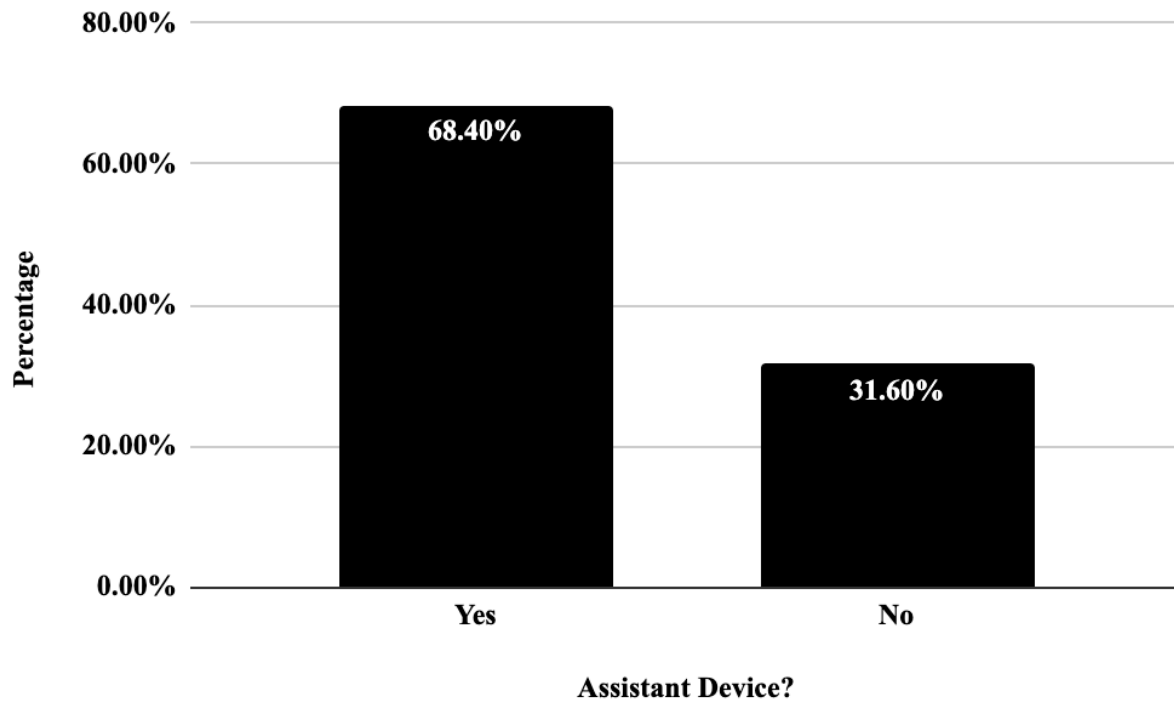


Note. N = 79

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Figure 4

Percentage of assistant devices

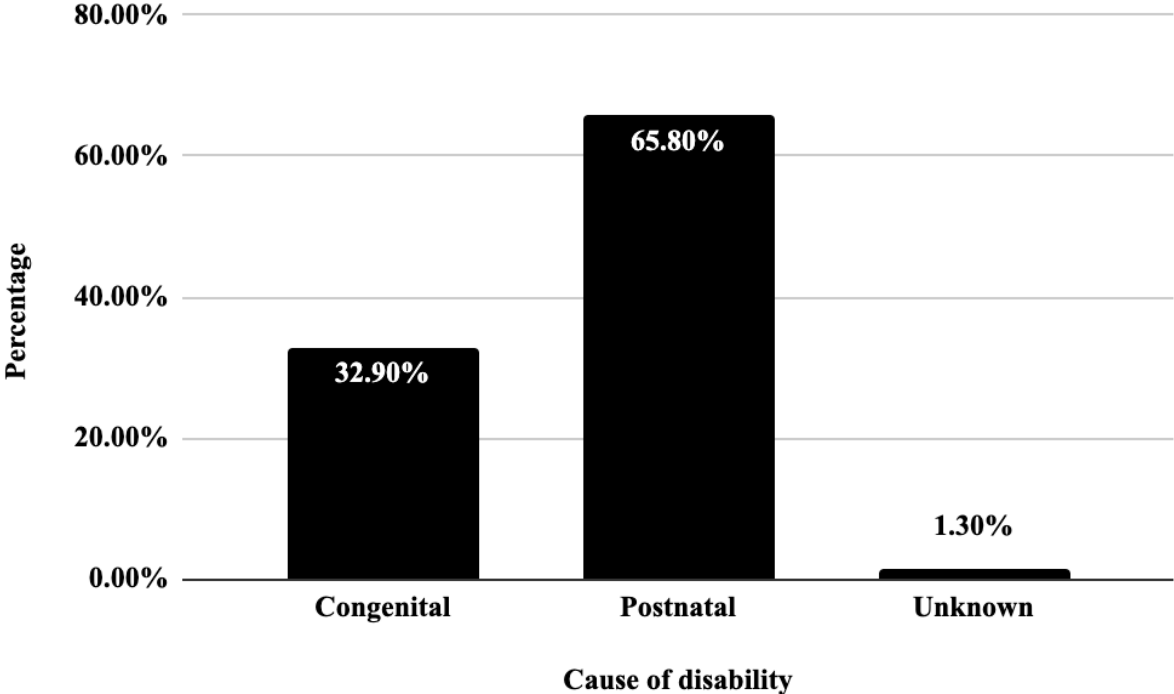


Note. N = 79

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Figure 5

Cause of disability by percentage

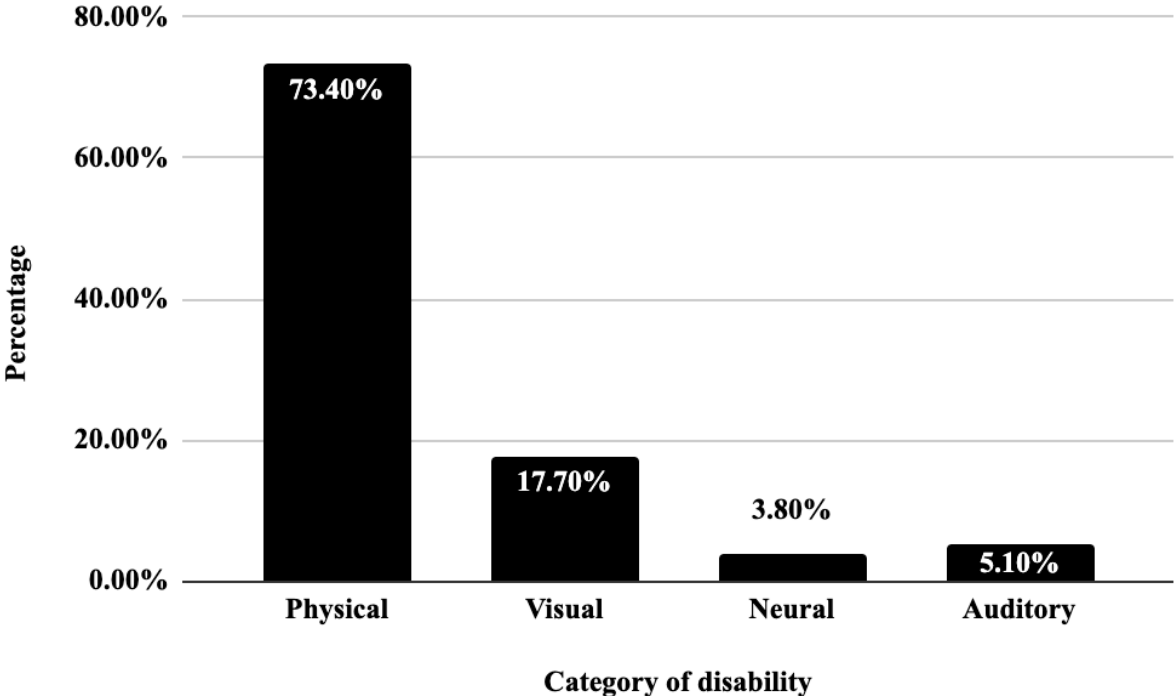


Note. N = 79

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Figure 6

Category of disability by percentage

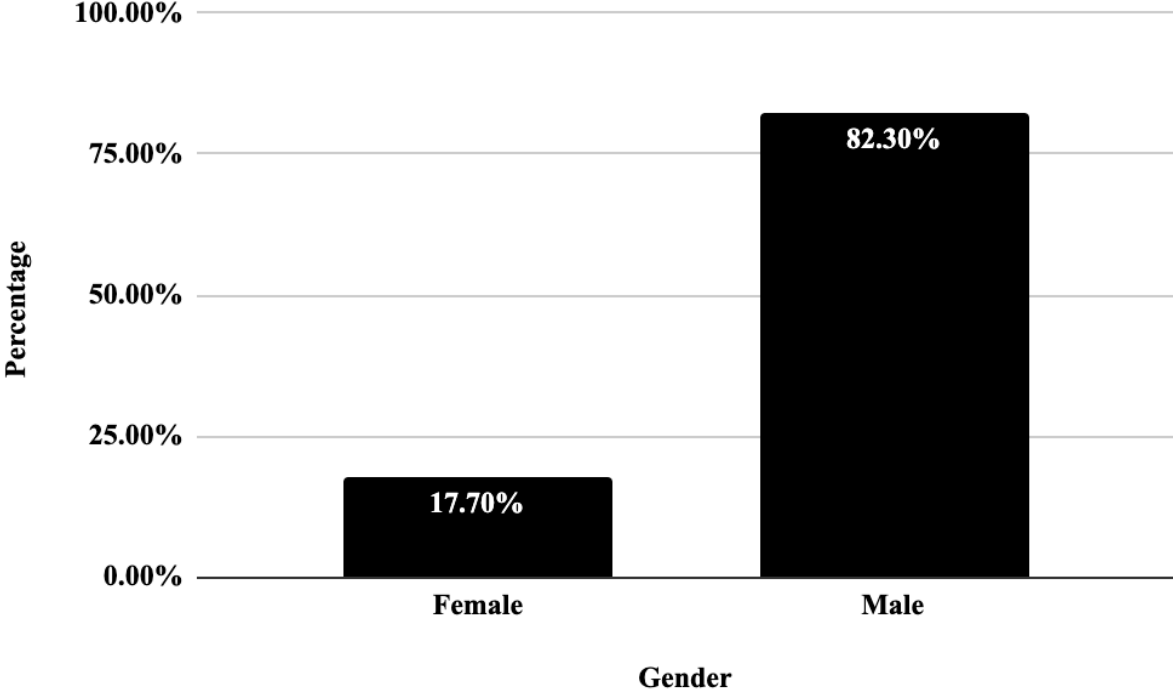


Note. N = 79

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Figure 7

Percentage of portrayals by gender

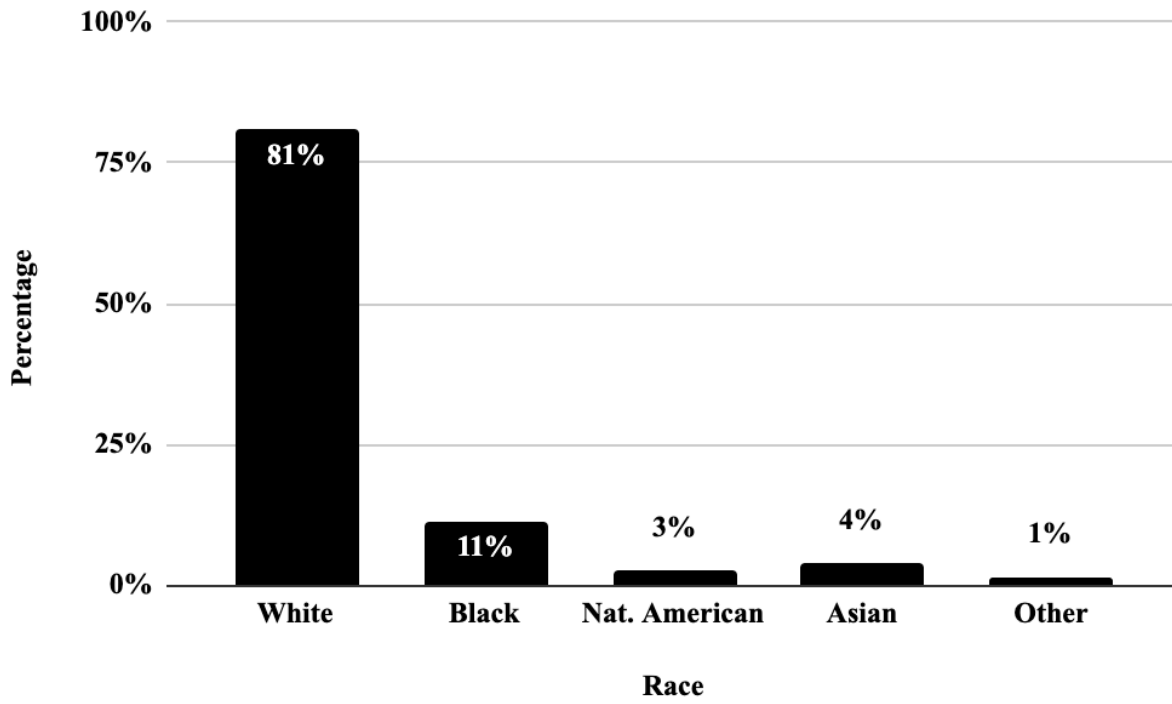


Note. N = 79

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Figure 8

Percentage of portrayals by race



Note. N = 79